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By-Pitcher, Robert W.

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Academic policy should be structured in a way that best serves the needs of both the institution and the individual student. Existing policies generally inherited from the past, were designed to protect the institution, and are based upon faulty assumptions regarding reasons for low academic performance. Five guidelines designed to meet the needs of the college and the needs of the student in academic difficulty are suggested: (1) have well established boundaries which are maintained, (2) be clearly understandable to non-members of faculty, (3) provide assistance to the student in setting realistic goals, (4) have an orderly procedure for exceptions, and (5) provide concrete possibilities for action to be taken by the suspended student. (KP)

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THE USE OF ACADEMIC POLICIES AS THERAPY

Robert W. Pitcher,
Educational Development Center

There is a feeling of living dangerously when one undertakes to discuss the relationship between academic policies and therapy for the student. At first glance it would appear that the two concept areas are nearly separate and independent. Many feel that academic policies are for the express purpose of maintaining the academic stance of the institution. Whether they are therapeutic or not is irrelevant to their purpose and should be of little concern to the academic community. On the other hand, there are many faculty and staff who feel keenly the importance of the individual student and insist that each case be handled individually and that a minimal academic policy structure be completely flexible.

It is the purpose of this paper to open the topic for discussion, to attempt to stimulate interest in exploring the topic in depth and to provide some tentative guidelines for functioning effectively. It is believed that the most significant result would be to stimulate enough interest among professionals to bring about individual explorations in depth of the relationship between the policy structure of the institution and the needs of the individual student.

At the outset it is well to recognize two problems: (1) there is a great deal of difficulty in bringing about change in the academic policy structure due to the decentralization of the decision making process in most institutions and, (2) there is no one pattern which is applicable for all schools. In fact, each institution must find its own way, in line with its own educational objectives. To identify these two problems carries with it a responsibility to not be overwhelmed by them. The role of the true professional is to work to bring basic principles to the forefront and, when appropriate, introduce the need for change.

The decade of the sixties has produced many challenges to the traditional structure of American higher education. While most of us regret instances of turmoil which disrupt the academic process, it is true that the needs of the individual student must be given greater recognition. It goes without saying that this recognition must be within the context of a balanced academic community in which the rights of all the members of the community are respected and maintained.

It is especially appropriate that we examine the topic at this time due to three current trends in American society.

1. The move toward providing higher education for all American

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youth is rapidly gaining momentum. It is easy to foresee the time when a college degree will be a minimum requirement for entering the majority of vocations. Since this is true, higher education must find better ways of rehabilitating the academic casualty so that his potential contribution is not lost.

2. There is an increased understanding of the specific reasons for academic difficulty and this knowledge needs to be reflected in the university's approach to the student. While there is a normal time lag in the implementation of the knowledge there is no reason to delay our efforts to apply what we know to the academic policy structure.

3. As the value of a college degree increases, there is a corresponding increase in the demand by society to give every student a realistic opportunity to complete the course work necessary to earn the degree. The traditional approach to academic failure was created during a time when a dismissed student could transfer to another college in order to reestablish himself. This is no longer easily possible. For men, the traditional approach is unrealistic in the light of selective service regulations. There is little question but that students and their families will expect higher education to respond to changed conditions by adapting their policies and procedures.

The dilemma confronting the academic world is how to find a way to maintain the academic standards of the institution and, at the same time, do what is best for the individual student. This is a real problem and its resolution is not readily apparent. It is no wonder, therefore, that it is easy for well-intentioned people to continue with the existing procedures. The development of a more effective approach requires a great deal of time and effort without being able to promise a kind of automatic success in achieving the objectives of an individual-oriented approach.

It is an assumption of this paper that the academic standards of the institution must be maintained. Realistic standards for academic performance are highly valued so that the issue is not whether they should be maintained but, rather, how they should be implemented. It is a basic conclusion that significant improvement can be made in the institution's relationship to the low performing student primarily through adjusting the procedures by which the policies are implemented. This is the path by which both the best interests of the institution and the best interests of the individual can be served.

Characteristics of Existing Policies and Procedures

The operating policies of the majority of institutions of higher education have a number of characteristics in common. To identify them, as this paper will do, is not to automatically assume that one should regard them as being negative and/or of dubious worth. Through the years they have performed an important function in maintaining the academic nature of the various colleges and universities and it is appropriate that some recognition be made of this fact. With this in mind, let us give attention to some of the common characteristics.

1. The existing statements of the operating policies and procedures tend to have been inherited from sometime in the past. It is often true that in a given university no major revision has been made in the last decade or two unless the statement has had to be modified in order to make it capable of being programmed for the computer. Generally, in a case like this, there are few real changes in the institution's stance on the matter.

The tranquil campus scene which merited the designation of the "halls of ivy" is no longer characteristic of American higher education. The noise of construction, the flood of students, and the increasing involvement in the affairs of the world have contributed to making the scene of higher education dynamic and vital. This is readily acknowledged by faculty everywhere. What is not so readily acknowledged is the need to bring the practices of the tranquil campus into the stirring and controversial conditions of the sixties.

2. A second important characteristic of the existing policies and procedures is that they were designed to protect the institution and to maintain the standards desired by the faculty. The need for protection is unquestioned but there is also a need to introduce the suggestion that it is within the objectives of the college to protect the rights and needs of the student. Such protection for the low achieving student is often not immediately apparent.

Perhaps the greatest lack lies in the failure to provide constructive courses of action to be taken by those academically suspended students who, shocked by the experience, sincerely wish to mend their ways. An example of such failure is the highly popular approach which requires that the relationship of the student to the college be discontinued for one year. Admittedly, this protects the institution but it throws the student into a pure trial and error situation in the effort to cope with the problem with few, if any, constructive alternatives for action. It should be easy to see that the important factor is not the passage of time but rather what the student does with his time that is significant.

The responsibility of higher education to provide a college education for increasing numbers of students should force us to seriously examine the type of approach which removes the problem student but does little about his problem.

3. A third characteristic of the existing policies and procedures is that, in general, they are based upon faulty assumptions regarding the reason for low academic performance.

It is interesting to note that while the academic community is critical of the larger society for its failure to make use of the best knowledge available, the institutions of higher education are remarkably slow in modifying their own approaches to internal situations in the light of increased knowledge and understanding. Such is the case in the matter of low academic performance. Two basic assumptions have been employed for centuries in spite of the greatly increased understanding of human behavior which has occurred in the last few decades. These assumptions are that a student does not succeed in college because he either does not have adequate potential for college or that he does not really want it enough to work.

Both of the assumptions are true--part of the time. They explain the reason for low performance of some students but the number is a minority. Students fail due to a variety of reasons--inadequate high school preparation, a negative self-concept, lack of adjustment to the demands of college, difficulty in the language skills, psychological conflicts, deprived cultural experiences, a value system with academic achievement as a low priority, and poor learning conditions.

Evaluation Guidelines

All human institutions have some limitations in which practices fall short of the ideal held by responsible and concerned individuals. Colleges and universities do not constitute an exception to this common problem. Periodically, however, efforts are made to upgrade the quality of the policy structure and the procedures which support it. With this in mind, it is helpful to have a number of guidelines to assist us in making the judgments necessary to evaluate elements of the existing or proposed and/or procedure. Five guidelines will be identified as being relevant for the purpose of meeting both the needs of the college or university and the needs of the student in academic difficulty.

1. There should be well established boundaries, which are maintained.

It is easy to overlook the student's need for structure and stability in the effort to treat each case individually. While it may be motivated by the best of intentions it appears that an

unpredictable result of low performance is more damaging to the mental health of the student and to his eventual meeting of the academic expectations than is a clearly stated, well established boundary dividing acceptable and unacceptable performance.

A significant percentage of students participating in the E.D.C. College Achievement Program are individuals who have a habit or a compulsion to test every limit established by adults. If the limit gives, they take advantage of it and continue to try to cut corners and manipulate their way through college. If the limit holds, they are brought face to face with their own inadequacies and frequently take a significant step toward true academic achievement.

A sound academic probation policy catches the low achiever as close as possible to the point of low achievement. This is a language which can be understood by the student and his family because there is an identifiable cause and effect relationship. He did not perform well; he is on academic probation. In the interest of helping the student, some institutions have an elaborate system of warnings prior to actual probation. I would like to suggest that the concern for the student could be expressed more helpfully if the probation period were extended and pre-probation warning periods were eliminated.

The act of suspending or dismissing students for low academic performance is an unpleasant task. It is no wonder that in any group of faculty there are those who constantly find themselves with the general position that the student should be given another chance. These are often outnumbered by those who seem to feel that the greater the number of students who are suspended the better the institution is fulfilling its primary task.

Admittedly, it is difficult to find one's way through this maze. It has been our observation that the experience of being suspended for academic reasons can be very therapeutic for the student, if practical alternatives for action are offered.

One evening, while waiting for a friend of mine I found myself in his living room with his eleven month old son, who was playing in his playpen. He would pull himself up, stand, get a little careless and fall down. He repeated this several times with little commotion. Things changed, however, when his father came into the room. The baby pulled himself up, became careless and fell. At this point he cried until his father went over and stood him up. Three times the performance was repeated with the father picking the child up. One could observe that it is human nature to want to take the easy way out and to get someone else to do things for you that you could do for yourself. Ninety percent of the low achievers we work with would take advantage of an academic situation in much the same manner that the eleven month old took advantage of his situation. They

would rather "cry" than expend the amount of effort necessary to bring about a radical revision of their habit patterns. In my opinion, they will not develop "academic muscle" until they have to meet a reasonable level of expectation.

Expectations, in the form of standards, should be carefully set but once they are set, they should be maintained in a highly predictable manner. Legitimate exceptions can be built into the structure so that even these are predictable, e.g., an exception may be granted when the death of a member of the student's family occurs during the semester.

2. The system should be developed in such a way that it is capable of being clearly understood by non-members of the faculty and staff.

You will note that the emphasis here is upon being clearly understood rather than upon being well defined. The situation is analogous to a legal statement being in a language known to lawyers but being suspect by non-lawyers. A system does not have to be complicated to be effective. In fact, there is some possibility that the degree of effectiveness is in inverse proportion to the degree of complexity of the system.

A good starting point is to establish academic probation for all those below a C average or a 2.0 on a 4.0 system. This is easily communicated, easily understood, and easily administered. It is not doing the student a service to soften the consequences of low academic performance by delaying the onset of probation. In fact, it often has the opposite effect of lulling the student into a false sense of security.

Students, like other human beings, tend to produce in relationship to what is expected of them. As a professor, I tried making the first test in the course easier in order to introduce the class gradually to a reasonably difficult course. I found to my amazement that the first test set the level of expectation and it was very difficult to get better performance and maintain the morale of the class.

A way to determine how well the student understands the probation-suspension system is to interview a random selection of students and ask questions designed to elicit specific information. This can be very helpful.

3. The approach is strengthened if the student is assisted in setting realistic goals for achievement.

Due to the diversity of the existing practices, this guideline has to be thought about on the theoretical level. The extent to which

it can be incorporated into a specific system requires careful consideration.

The typical underachiever has difficulty establishing realistic subgoals and often fails to make the connection between his G.P.A. of 1.4 on a 4.0 system and the need (for purposes of illustration) to have a 2.0 by the end of two more semesters. It is obvious that progress must be made this semester, but how much? Does he need to get a 1.8 or a 2.4? Both indicate improvement. I have found confusion among students and families in that they interpret improvement as being what is needed. This is often divorced from the reality of the situation in that approximately a 2.35 is needed for each of the two remaining semesters. To receive a 1.8 will create a situation in which it becomes necessary to obtain approximately a 2.75 the third semester. Since this appears to be highly unlikely in the light of his performance to date the question is raised as to whether he ought to be retained.

An illustration of one approach to setting realistic goals might clarify this guideline more adequately. In one four year college, the maximum number of quarters a student is permitted on probation is four. He may be suspended earlier than the maximum depending upon the seriousness of his academic predicament. There are usually about 170 students on the probation list. Each record is examined by the dean of students and a realistic goal is set for the coming quarter. This goal is designed to identify what adequate progress means in this case. The ruling is stated in terms of the special goal, e.g., probation with a requirement of a 2.30. This does several things: (1) it enables the student to be in sharp focus as to what is required, (2) it prepares the family for what is likely to happen if the goal is not reached and, (3) it facilitates the fulfillment of the institution's counseling responsibility to the student.

4. <u>An adequate system will have an orderly procedure for exceptions.</u>

While the dangers of developing too much red tape must be avoided, it is important to have an orderly procedure for granting exceptions. This will contribute to the accomplishment of several desirable objectives. In the first place, it tends to inspire more confidence in the integrity of the process than a less orderly, often spur-of-the-moment, approach is capable of inspiring. Secondly, it introduces the possibility of consistency in the rulings so that there is a general belief generated in the justice of rulings. This is going to become increasingly important in the decade ahead of us. Thirdly, with the responsibility for a sound approach clearly fixed, it is possible to conduct periodic evaluations of the process and to institute modifications as circumstances change.

5. A professional approach will provide concrete possibilities for action to be taken by the suspended or dismissed student.

Higher education no longer can divest itself of the responsibility for providing meaningful alternatives for the student who has just been separated from the academic community. He is not a leper to be turned out into the wilderness for a minimum of one year. He is a human being who requires some form of assistance so that, if he is willing to pay the price, he can regain his position among the college population. Educators, of all people, should have little difficulty in understanding the injustice represented by a process which pronounces the individual as unfit but does little to identify ways and means by which academic health can be restored.

The Educational Development Center was established to determine what could be done in the matter of providing viable alternatives to the dismissed student. With 350,000 students dismissed from colleges and universities each year, the need for each institution to take constructive action is readily apparent. No one organization or even one approach is adequate in the light of the magnitude of the challenge. It is necessary to attack the problem from as many sides as possible if higher education is to fulfill its responsibility to the individual and to the society which it serves.